

A singular perspective

Don't pigeonhole Tracey Moffatt — the bankable visual artist prefers to be known as interesting. Rosalie Higson reports

TRACEY Moffatt worries about every little detail. She hates to see her exhibitions before they're ready. "I'm so controlling! I'm going, 'There's a hammer in the corner — you are going to pick it up, aren't you?'"

A dynamo in a Puoc top and black trousers, Moffatt has a smoky voice and a big laugh. She's funny and friendly, but intense too. She's notoriously difficult to interview; people say she's prickly, but they always say that about women with minds of their own.

One of Australia's most exciting and successful international artists, her works incorporate photography and film-making in unique, stylised narratives and tableaux in once familiar and strange. Such is the power of her images that Moffatt's work is represented in London's Tate Modern and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as every leading Australian gallery.

Her early works are set in iconic Australian landscapes — with a twist. *Something More*, the 1989 series of nine photographs that set her on the path to stardom, fetched extraordinary prices for Australian photography. The record paid at auction for *Something More 1* — the famous self-portrait of Moffatt dressed in a cheongsam, against a run-down rural background, executed in the super-saturated colour that became her trademark — was \$119,250 in November 2002.

Something More 1, as it happens, has become something of an irritant to her. This year, she withdrew permission for it to be reproduced in auction catalogues and print media, saying it had become overexposed. "The image loses power after a while," she insists. She feels so strongly about it, she averts her gaze when we pass the nine giant images that are part of a full-scale survey of Moffatt's work, which opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney tomorrow.

Born in Brisbane in 1960 to an Aboriginal mother, she grew up in a white, working-class foster family. As energetic and creative then as she is now, she was always the ringleader, she says. Moffatt's early life and family are often off-limits in interviews. She opens up today, though, talking in the context of her art. In this exhibition, she has a work, screenprinted in sepia directly on to the museum's wall, which represents a seminal moment in her childhood.

"My foster mother and her older daughter came out to watch me take photos with a fake big camera," she recalls. "When you come from nothing, you have to make what you don't have. So I made a pretend camera."

"I'll never forget this because it was very rare to get any sort of attention from the adults. To have them shift from family gossip around the kitchen table was a very big deal."

Even then she was controlling her environment. She laughs: "They actually were interested, so this might have been the first moment when I realised that creativity gets your attention." Alongside *I made a camera*, she has written: "When I think up a new image the excitement is still there."

Moffatt went to art school in Brisbane and served her artistic apprenticeship making music videos, among other commissions. By her late 20s, her idiosyncratic work was attracting notice.

Every new series of photographic images



In good standing: Moffatt in front of her main picture; *I made a camera*, above; *Something More 5* Main picture: Eric



is a big production; it's like being on a film set. Moffatt uses set designers, make-up, technicians and lighting — even, occasionally, someone else to shoot the images — both in Australia and in New York, her home of the past five years.

She is always alert for new faces and places. "I'm always acosting people on the street. I find new people all the time."

Moffatt loathes being pigeonholed as an artist — by race, sex, even style. "I've made a new film, *I made it for women*... so am I a feminist? I find that boring. It's another label that bores me," she says.

"None of us like labels... if you met Aretha Franklin she would say, 'Don't call me a soul singer', because she does everything. I guess I'd like to be known as Tracey Moffatt, interesting artist."

Love, her new film which is showing at the exhibition, is her third collaboration with

Melbourne editor Gary Hillberg. "I've taken Hollywood films and cut them up," she explains. "I've actually used them illegally. I just tape them from the television, so the quality of the image is not very good. I couldn't afford to pay the rights to all these movies. I haunt the video shops of New York looking for footage."

She takes me to watch the film. On the way to the screening room, we pass a messy corner: "See, this is what I mean!" she says, gesturing towards rolls of bubble wrap, wires and boxes scattered around. "Are they really going to move it? I feel it's my duty to..."

Her film begins like those compilation homages they do at the Oscars, but quickly turns from love to an orchestrated explosion of violence.

"When the men start hitting the women, it gets horrible. You think it's going to be

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Tracey Moffatt

fabulous, but then it turns. It's a film girls. Even a lot of men are scared

Now it's Moffatt's turn to be graphed. "She's scared of me because photographer! I'm telling her who she laughs, when I come upon her: *Australian's* photographer. "Is that up lens, is that wide angle? No, no light!" She's half joking, but she's not too comfortable in front of the unless she is controlling the action

Moffatt moves easily between home and New York. She made *As Series* — a homage to animatic Brisbane and is printing it in New York got an Australian setting, but it's a story. Again, it could be anywhere.

She stylises her works, making locations universal rather than specific to leave interpretation to the viewer even says she doesn't care if works are interpreted.

"The truth is we don't have any. What I have done is (make) art (years and my success has been an success. Just one thing leading to the go where I'm happy to make the work

She does, however, have something in mind for the next little while

"I'm going back to where I'm from. I have a dream of buying house in Queensland, so I'm looking don't own my apartment in New York thought of spending millions of dollars own a loft... I'd rather put the mon charming beach house. Even though only be there three times a year, the of having it makes my heart sing."

Tracey Moffatt, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, tomorrow until February 29.

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